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Some Needed Research Regarding the Language and Reading Instructional Problems of Spanish Speaking Children.

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Three major areas of needed research in language and reading development for children of Spanish-speaking backgrounds are presented in a general overview. The first area of need is that of normative and descriptive studies of prelearning processes. This includes analyses of language base and home language behavior and is aimed at a more precise description of bilingual style. The second area of need is that of compensatory educational programs. These should be based on research and experimentation designed to determine language characteristics and needs. The third area of need is that of research in curriculum and materials modifications. Present curricula should be researched and evaluated, and new and innovative curricula should be designed which reflect research findings. An extensive bibliography of material reviewed is included. (MD)

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SOME NEEDED RESEARCH REGARDING
THE LANGUAGE AND READING INSTRUCTIONAL PROBLEMS
OF SPANISH SPEAKING CHILDREN

(To be presented: Research Reports: Specific Reading Abilities and Needs
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Pupils from diverse Spanish speaking backgrounds constitute
the largest linguistic minority in the United States. There are several
million Mexican-Americans, for example, mostly residing in five South-
western states (59), whose children frequently experience serious diffi-
culties in our unilingual, monocultural public schools (26). Various
reports (44) of dropout rate and number of years of schooling com-
pleted (45) by these children is more than suggestive of the need

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for a reappraisal of current educational approaches through long-ranged and carefully planned research and development.

It should be clearly noted that the educational achievement of these children, as conditions exist today, is complicated by several dynamically interacting factors (1)(10), which differ in varying mixes based upon such influences as geographical, regional, and familial factors, individual differences, socio-economic status and relative period of a family's entry to this country. Mentioned most often as primary is the traumatic effects resulting from requiring these children to discard their mother-tongue and quickly, effectively and efficiently develop a second language — English — to communicate and learn with upon entering our schools (42)(47). In addition, it can be noted that these children, all too often, find themselves in school environments wherein forced acculturation involving the arbitrary imposition of certain mythical and folkish monocultural American patterns of values, mores and taboos is the rule of the day. Frequently, these children and their families are also mired in poverty with its economic, mental, physical, social and personal concomitants (56).

In spite of these critical and complex factors, instructional procedures for these children are standard, traditional fare supported by biased and subjective opinions (2) and experiences of school decision-makers; opinions and biases that are both far removed from objective and scientifically collected data, as well as from valid, logical, insightful and humanistic thinking (20). Current school programs in various language areas hence reflect almost little, if

any, specific differentiation of method or materials to the particular needs of these children, particularly their unique linguistic and cultural backgrounds (54)(60).

While many instances of educational "project funding" have been forthcoming in the so-called "Great Society" years, there has been a consistent pattern of failure to substantially build into such projects objective methods of evaluation of the product, operationally, in terms of short and long-term educational goals. Indeed, the inclusion of experimental designs in various federally funded educational projects for Spanish speaking pupils for the scientific identification of pertinent, independent variables has been sadly lacking.

This paper is primarily concerned with some needed research in the areas of language and reading development as these areas relate to pupils from Spanish speaking backgrounds. Therefore, it is a general overview of some recommended research in these very highly related areas. It is recognized that issues such as these are complicated by the absence of clear and universally accepted definitions of the process, skills and abilities or procedures in teaching this quality referred to as "reading." Furthermore, it is noted that the suggested research discussed here need not necessarily be considered uniquely suited for pupils of Spanish speaking backgrounds.

I. Normative Descriptive Studies of Processes Required for Reading

We are frequently advised that by age six, children bring to school a considerable degree of expertise in aural-oral language and

that this language facility is a reflection of children's subculture and learning experiences outside of the school (9)(15)(57). This base of language should eventually be studied and analyzed to the point of serving as a critically important source of data for determining both intervention strategies for compensatory educational efforts or for determining and developing innovative curriculum and materials approaches respectively (6).

It would, therefore, be appropriate to suggest the urgent need for the collection of precise descriptive data on the language behavior of pupils from Spanish speaking homes. Information on postulated differences in style and in level of linguistic functioning in both Spanish and English should be explored by geographic regions, socio-economic levels and unique familial, local and environmental influences (13)(22)(28)(35).

These language analyses should include phonological, morphological and syntactical analyses as well as analyses of vocabularies in the referential and functional domains. One end should be the more precise description (39)(40) of regional bilingual styles in both English and Spanish, rather than the mass and undifferentiated labeling of these children as "bilingual" without reference to the realities and refinements of the meaning of this term on local and individual linguistic bases. The techniques of contrastive linguistic analysis (33) must also be applied in the study of linguistic functioning between the two languages on regional bases to obtain more precise data for decision-making, planning educational programs and experimental studies

of the effects of programs of instruction carefully tailored and suited to differing linguistic styles (41).

More basic research data appear strongly needed regarding the status and developmental nature of conceptual behavior (29) in various populations of pupils whose growth is complicated by the influence of two overlapping cultures and the development of two interacting languages. In this context, descriptive studies of the development of cognitive styles from the earlier sensory-motor, perceptual, pre-conceptual phases to the more advanced logical, abstract, and symbolic phases of development (16) in pupils from Spanish speaking backgrounds appear to be needed for curriculum development purposes and the planning of both learning sequences and intervention strategies.

While attention in this section has been devoted to the need for the collection of cognitive and linguistic data, attention should also be directed towards the collection of pertinent information related to various components of learning such as set for learning, attention, concentration, reinforcement and motivational factors (48). The influence of subcultural factors on learning, as well as data regarding regional and familial perception of schools and teachers, are also areas requiring much study.

II. Research and Experimentation Within Compensatory Educational Programs

Certain cognitive and linguistic characteristics and conditions can be reasoned from experience and experimental evidence to be conducive to success in various language learning tasks, among these reading (12)(24).

Which specific pre-learning abilities and processes are more important than others in given stages of reading development and for given sequences of specific skills and abilities in reading for pupils of Spanish speaking backgrounds has yet to be fully explored (7). Indeed, this general problem has universal application. However, far less information is available in this area pertaining to pupils of Spanish speaking backgrounds than for any other group.

Teasing out from constellations of abilities those particular capabilities necessary for success in specific reading skill acquisition, as well as general reading development, therefore, appears to be a primary research need prior to the massive, undifferentiated institution of the typical pre-school compensatory educational programs, which might be reasoned to provide some hypothetically diffuse and possible long-term positive effects that are not being discounted here. Acquisition of information and data such as has been here suggested, however, would have an important practical effect in at least two major ways in this area. First, such knowledge would contribute towards the development of a new type of pre-school program particularly geared for the effective and efficient preparation of such children for specific language and reading programs of instruction awaiting them upon school entrance. Secondly, such information should eventually contribute towards the intelligent modification of school language and reading programs to more realistically deal with and include experiences which account for such pre-school learning differences that children from these backgrounds bring with them to schools.

Thus, pre-school compensatory programs such as Head Start must be continuously assessed and scientifically studied to upgrade their effects on facilitating learning in such areas as language and reading. It is suggested that a serious need exists for this continuous refining, sequencing and redirecting of learning experiences around both these critically important cognitive and linguistic variables, as well as rapidly changing school curricula that hopefully will, in the future, be designed and awaiting these children in first grade.

The identification of various highly relevant and critical abilities for learning different sequences of language and reading skills can be derived from carefully designed experimental pre-school programs and follow-up studies of the effects of such programs on subsequent learnings and behaviors. Studies of the effects of various types of initial training (23)(25)(49) in such relevant capabilities on subsequent skill acquisition in language and reading areas would be of great potential value in the education of culturally and linguistically different children.

In short, which pre-requisite processes to develop, when, how, for whom specifically, and for what particular language and reading outcomes are questions that require intensive, coordinated, and planned scientific exploration. Children from poverty backgrounds with somewhat differing subcultural and linguistic styles have been shown to be particularly vulnerable to maladroit and undifferentiated teaching procedures based upon little objective understanding of their specific needs.

Compensatory or remedial programs, particularly those in second language and/or reading correction for pupils of Spanish

speaking backgrounds must increasingly move towards more research-oriented approaches designed around seeking answers to fundamental questions rather than in superficial trials and demonstrations of electronic and mechanical equipment, laboratories far removed from naturalistic settings for language development, as well as average gains in reading using questionable criterion measures and data gathering techniques. Variables must be identified in such programs which supply precise information as to what in specific approaches is both effective and efficient for various types of pupils in realizing significant changes in desired language and reading outcomes(21).

Problems in teaching English as a second language or developmental oral English programs involving such factors as differentiating methodology (32)(38) based upon individual differences in initial language styles (11), the timing for the introduction of second language learning (53)(55), the development of newer, more creative learning contexts (8)(36)(37), reenforcement and feedback conditions conducive to language learning, as well as psycho-cultural (34)(35)(51) considerations in second language learning require much research effort.

A basically different approach to diagnosis and remediation of reading problems with the vast population of underachieving, underprivileged children seems to have been long in order. The development and standardization of improved and refined measuring instruments for diagnostic evaluation, the streamlining of long-exhaustive and frequently rigid and imprecise diagnostic routines, as well as the development

of new materials, methods and organizational procedures for remedial activities for culturally and linguistically different pupils appear to be critically required. In short, a fresh and more realistic research model for underachieving pupils must be developed which would generate a whole range of operationally testable hypotheses in this area. The possibilities of applying such findings as these to experimentation with initial instruction in reading for younger pupils has never been fully realized in reading.

III. Research in Curriculum Methods and Materials

Compensatory and remedial approaches have, as underlying assumptions, the modification of the learner (in some fashion) to increase the probability of success in given areas of learning. Modifying the school in terms of changing curriculum and materials, based on child needs, is not a particularly recent notion, although the conception of somehow changing the school curriculum for those children of Spanish speaking backgrounds -- a group that apparently has particular needs for some changes -- is indeed recent and in some regions considered startling. Beginning reading programs designed specifically for so-called bilingual pupils (52), language-experience approaches (14), linguistically oriented conceptualizations applied to reading (4)(27) and bilingual-bicultural educational curricula and schools have all been noted in the literature. Very little research is available regarding the effects of such approaches on various reading outcomes for pupils of Spanish speaking backgrounds.

In all likelihood, the concept of bilingual, bicultural education holds more promise and requires more immediate innovative research activity than any of the approaches heretofore discussed (18) (19). While this approach basically involves teaching the child from a Spanish speaking background such subjects as reading (30)(31)(43) in his first (or strongest) language and teaching him English (or another language) second and in a slower, more carefully designed manner, much more is involved (3)(5)(46)(50). Bi-cultural, bi-ethnic factors become part of the curriculum along with concurrent use of two languages. Complex organizational issues are also involved (17). Well-designed experimental programs based upon the carefully differentiated linguistic and individual needs of pupils in given geographic regions with unique patterns of characteristics are required (58).

Teaching Spanish, however, in an elementary school (to Spanish or English speaking children) or introducing a section or two of English as a second language is not bilingual education. Much confusion, misunderstanding and anxiety among both lay and professional people already exists. Therefore, a first step towards establishing and developing research models for such programs must involve the defining of terms and goals. Experimental study of various phases of bilingual educational approaches must follow this.

Further research activities should be directed around such problems as the differential effects on various school learnings with the mother-tongue (Spanish) as the medium as compared to the national language (English), the timing, differential teaching and introduction of English, the effects of one-way (one group learning in two languages) and two-way schools (two groups learning in their own and each

others language), the materials, conditions, personnel, etc. for bilingual educational approaches, as well as the influences of unique regional, geographic and environmental factors on the forms and approaches to bilingual education.

Both within and outside of the context of bilingual education, experimentation with previously mentioned curriculum modifications are necessary, for it can be reasoned that many innovative approaches such as modified language experience approaches, or linguistically oriented programs of reading instruction, hold potentially valuable effects for specific pupils from Spanish speaking backgrounds with different needs. Indeed, creative modification of standard basal reading approaches should not be discounted altogether for many of these pupils. Many of these approaches must be explored and dimensions within them that contribute for specific pupils under particular conditions must be isolated. Particularly important, however, is the realization that language and reading instructional approaches for different pupils of Spanish speaking backgrounds have been inadequately studied.

IV. Conclusion

This paper has presented a general overview of some needed research in language and reading development for pupils of Spanish speaking backgrounds. Three major areas of research needs were overviewed and briefly discussed: (1) normative and descriptive studies of pre-learning processes; (2) compensatory educational

programs; (3) research in curriculum and materials modifications.

A relatively consistent picture can be presented relative to current conditions and activities within the scope of this paper.

A. The challenge of educating pupils of Spanish speaking backgrounds has been with us, particularly in the Southwest, for much longer than most realize. For other areas of the United States, Spanish speaking pupils of differing ethnic backgrounds have been a relatively recent occurrence.

B. Educational opportunities for pupils with these unique backgrounds have, on the whole, tended to be inadequate, unrealistic, and (although equivalent) far from the mythical American educational ideal of "equal." In certain areas where the education of these pupils can be dated back to periods prior to statehood, such factors as linguistic and cultural imperialism still represent a significant barrier to real progress or even cooperation.

C. Research and development activities focusing on pupils of Spanish speaking backgrounds, however, are in a strong upswing and projects are being planned or are under development or under field-trial in many areas. Little national research coordination or long-term planning, however, is evidenced and a very small number of decision-makers in higher echelons of education are uniquely prepared and trained for working in either research or development projects or in public education with these pupils. Very few professionals involved in such activities actually derive from Spanish speaking backgrounds themselves.

D. Because little, if any, central coordinated planning of research and development activities around a major schema of operations is apparent, it can be predicted that much piecemeal research and development will eventually result, that will not only overlap with other projects but will also be mutually contradictory and hence misleading. Much of the experiences obtained from the years of uncoordinated research in reading will probably characterize this area, unless national coordinating leadership is demonstrated.

E. A framework for research activities presented in this paper is only suggestive of the long-ranged, sequential, and coordinated kinds of research activities needed in this area, beginning with the normative and descriptive and leading towards the practical and applied.

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